

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH SERGEANT MAJOR THOMAS COLEMAN,
SERGEANT MAJOR OF PROGRAM EXECUTIVE OFFICE SOLDIER, VIA TELECONFERENCE SUBJECT:
BODY ARMOR IN THE U.S. ARMY TIME: 3:30 P.M. EST DATE: FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2009

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LINDY KYZER (Army Public Affairs): This is Lindy Kyzer with Army
Public Affairs. Thank you so much for everyone who is joining us today. Thank
you very much, Sergeant Major Thomas Coleman, sergeant major of Program
Executive Office Soldier. He's going to be discussing the Army's body armor and
taking your questions.

So with that, I'll go ahead and turn it over to Sergeant Major.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Okay. Thanks. This is Sergeant Major Tom Coleman
from Program Executive Officer Soldier. And I also dual-hat as the Natick
Soldier Systems Center sergeant major up in Natick, Massachusetts. So I wear a
couple different hats. First of all, I want to -- I just want to tell everybody
thank you for taking the opportunity to spend your Friday afternoon talking with
me. I think it's important to try to get a clear message out, and anything I
can do to help provide clarity, I'm all about, totally aware that blogging is
becoming more and more relevant, and more and more of our soldiers and family
members, as well as the general public, are tapping into this resource to get
their information.

So again, I am the sergeant major. I'm not an engineer. I'm not the
product manager. I'm not a program manager. My role within the PEO really is
to get out to the field, meet with soldiers and senior leaders, try to capture
the pulse on what their thoughts are on the equipment, bring that back to the
PEO, interact with the engineers and product and program managers and try to get
their thoughts relayed as well as provide information on product improvement to
the field.

So I'm a communication facilitator. But I just wanted to clarify that,
that I'm not the engineer, not a testing official. I am the sergeant major. So
if I can provide any clarity on that, feel free to ask on that as well.

With that being said, that's really it. I want to spend the time
answering your questions. And I saw the list of names that -- they're supposed
to be online. Is that accurate?

MS. KYZER: For the most part, sir. We're down a couple of folks. We
have Andrew Lubin on the line, we have Christian Lowe, we have Chuck Simmins,
Karen Francis and Rob Stewart.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Okay. Well, hello to all. I think, Christian, the last time you and I talked was in the Pentagon around the dust-test time frame.

Q That's correct. Good to talk to you again, Tom.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Hoo-ah! Okay.

Okay, well, I'm not sure what the order is here, so I'm just going to - - please let me know who you are when you ask a question. I'm not too sure who's facilitating, but I'll answer as I'm guided here.

MS. KYZER: I'll take care of you, sir.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Thank you.

MS. KYZER: (Laughs.) We'll go ahead and start with Andrew Lubin. He was first on the line.

Q Great. Sergeant Major, Andrew Lubin here, from The Military Observer - ON Point. How are you, sir? SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Hi, Andrew. Good.

Q Good. Sergeant Major, real simple question, I hope. You know, we're obviously on about the armored-plate discrepancies of -- that was announced last week. A year ago we also talked to the people who were involved in the Dragon Skin. Why are there so many issues with the Army as far as what the standards are and what there aren't? Why not just have a system where you do it, you test the plates, you accept them or not and get it done with?

Why all the rigamarole that brings this to everybody's attention time after time?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Well, we do have a testing standard. I don't want to regress back to the Dragon Skin. That was addressed pretty well in depth during that time frame. But the Army does have a pretty clear -- not pretty -- they have a very clear standard on what the body armor is designed to stop. So that exists.

Q Well, did these plates meet to standard? It's kind of yes or no, isn't it?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: No, you're absolutely correct. Good point. And the answer is yes, the plates met the standard to stop the threat round that they're designed to stop. The issue in question is some of the scoring that is involved in the way that they score the plates that are shot. And again, I'm really --

Q Does that mean they didn't pass, then? I'm sorry, I'm just -- if I'm a parent -- do they pass or do they not? That's -- you can't have it both ways.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: That's correct, and the plates passed.

Q Okay.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: The plates passed. And just a caveat on that, as well, you know, we -- there is not -- we do not have any record of any of the plates failing to stop the threat round it's designed to stop in theater. We

have no reports of deaths from the body armor failing to stop the threat it was designed to stop, none.

Q Okay. Then I'll let Christian and Chuck ask more about the standards, because otherwise I'll take up all the time. Thank you very much.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Thank you, sir.

MS. KYZER: Next we have Rob Stewart with NCOCall.com.

Q Sergeant Major, how are you? I'm -- I've read the DOD's IG report, and their conclusion was that they weren't addressing whether or not the standards were safe or not; they were questioning the reliability of the testing. And I understand that the -- they went ahead and -- the Army went ahead and recalled about 16,000 plus plates to ensure that the soldiers' confidence level is where it needs to be.

This is relatively, you know, recent report, but have you gotten any feedback from the field, from the NCOs on how the soldiers are receiving this?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Not yet, Rob. And I know you're attuned pretty well to the NCO corps out there.

To say that they don't get a little bit frustrated that now we've got to go through and, you know -- I mean, because as you and I know, only 16,000 plates, but that still means that every single soldier needs to inspect their plates.

Q Roger.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: It can be a bit of an inconvenience. But to this point, no, I have not received any negative feedback from the field.

I talked to some folks at the 101st. I've talked with the AMC's sergeant major who -- his arms reach pretty deep into the force. And as of right now, I have not heard any negativeness.

A couple of soldiers that I've talked to, to be honest with you, asked me, what's the big deal? I mean, our stuff works; we're not having problems with it. Now, they'll tell you, hey, if you can make it lighter, I'll take that. (Chuckles.) But as far as the plates not stopping threats, no, they don't -- initial word, and it's only by a few folks, is that they don't see what the issue is.

Q You know, what's amusing is, when I was in Iraq, we had the SAPIs. And when we had the ESAPIs, none of my soldiers wanted to change them out, for the same reason, that like you're adding a couple extra pounds, and these work just fine.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Roger that (chuckles).

Q So that's utility (chuckles). Well, thank you, Sergeant Major. I appreciate it.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Hey, Rob, thank you. I appreciate what you're doing.

MS. KYZER: Okay. And Chuck Simmins with North Shore Journal, do you have a question?

Q Yes, I do, maybe a couple quick questions.

Sergeant Major, thank you for your time here.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: No worries, Chuck. Thank you. Q We are talking about the most recent variation of the ceramic plates, correct?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: We're talking about the ESAPI. Yes, that is the most current fielded version.

Q Okay.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: We do have initiatives for the next generation, but those are not being fielded yet.

Q Okay.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: They're still in R&D.

Q And the question has to do with the plate itself, not anything to do with the vest.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: That's correct.

Q Okay. These plates, I seem to recall when they were about to be introduced, there were some issues with quality. It was right around the time that the Stryker armor got recalled as well. Can you describe the manufacturer's quality control process, so that we can get some idea of what kind of inspections they undergo before they leave to be sent overseas?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Well, I can talk through the required testing processes that take place. And I'll give it to you in the terms that I understand it. And if it needs to get more specific, perhaps a follow-up to STRATCOM, to talk specific numbers.

But our plates are tracked or tested in four different methods. We have a first article test, a lot acceptance test. And then we confirm that the plates are still good in theater, through PMCS and surveillance testing.

So a first article test means that the company has to go through a process that validates their manufacturing process, everything from the way the assembly line works to the ingredients that are put into their plates and then of course if the plates stop the threat round.

It's very detailed, very thorough. And there are quite a few plates that are shot, to confirm that everything is falling into place. So everything is looked at, from the process on the line all the way to the end state of shooting plates.

I cannot give you the details on how many plates they shoot, on a first article test, because I'm just not aware of that. But it's a significant number.

Q Is that a continuous process? Or is that at the beginning of the contract?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: That's at the very beginning, yeah.

Q Okay.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: And then that's before the government takes any delivery. They've passed their initial testing. They say they can do it. We believe they can do it. We've tested some of their plates.

They've fired up for a production run. And we do a first article test, checking everything at full swing. And if it passes a first article, now they are cleared to go into manufacturing. And they begin manufacturing.

Now, every lot that comes out of that company also goes through a lot acceptance test. And we reach in and pull out a certain number of plates, from each lot, depending on the lot size. It's a percentage. Again I don't know the numbers or the percentage. And those are shot to confirm that the lots are meeting their requirement. And then once they get fielded, then soldiers are required to do preventive maintenance checks and services on their equipment. And then also we have surveillance testing, with the non-destructive test equipment that's currently sitting in Kuwait.

Q How many plates in a vest?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: There are two SAPI plates, one in the front and one in the rear. They're identical. And then there are two ESBI, Enhanced Side Ballistic Inserts, that are on the flank of the soldier, that are about the quarter of the size of the front and back plates. And that's to provide obviously to cover that gap on the torso, on the flanks.

Q Okay, so 16,000 recalled means 4,000 vests out of service, kind of.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: No, not at all, and I do want to clarify some verbiage here. We're not calling this a recall. This is a return. And I know it's, and you guys are much better writers than I.

But a recall is, there's a problem. You know, peanut butter is giving you salmonella poisoning. We're recalling that. This is a return. They are not defective. This is just out of an abundance of caution. So I just want to throw that out there. But the plates are separate from the vest. They put in and come out.

So no, the vests are fine, and the plates they're wearing are safe and fine. But if they have one of those lot numbers, they simply put a request in through their normal supply channels, and they have their plates in their vest, the new plates will show up out there, they pull the plates out that we're asking to be returned, and they put their new plates in. So no, it does not affect the vest at all.

Q Thank you.

MS. KYZER: And -- yup. And now it's time for Karen Francis with Parents Zone.

Q Hi. Thank you, Sergeant Major. I'm coming at this as the wife of somebody in country right now, and also for the parents on my page, who are worried that they keep hearing this, they keep hearing that everything's fine, but we're taking a back -- abundance of caution, et cetera. And I realize it's not, you know, peanut butter and salmonella, but they are wondering: Is that company that is making the plates doing their own inspections, or is someone else? Is a company -- and not the lowest bidder, we hope -- coming in and doing the testing? Or is someone from DOD walking in there and saying, "Okay, we're going to take, you know, a sample from this batch and a sample from that batch"? They have questions mostly on the testing.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Yes. Absolutely, Karen. And I think you have an incredibly important role here and with what you're doing to try to educate the family members. And that includes my families also.

The government provides the oversight of testing. Okay?

Q Okay.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: So the companies -- now again, I talked about first article tests and lot acceptance tests. There were some incidents where the companies -- we didn't have a government official in on a lot acceptance test. But that wasn't the cause of the problem. But that is some of the correction -- there's a government representative at every one of the FAT and LAP tests that take place. So it's not just the company calling us saying, "Hey, we're good."

Q Yeah. (Chuckles.)

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: It is government representation that is there. Q Okay.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: And I got to say, though, Karen that -- I mean, this is my number-one concern, is confidence in the family members. Soldiers are confident because they're on the battlefield. They see what happens when those plates take a strike. They get back up, or they see their buddy get back up and shake it off, and they get on with their mission.

It's the family members --

Q It's Mom who's sitting there.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: -- absolutely -- that doesn't see firsthand what's going on.

And, you know, I mean, I have my own family call me up and say, "Hey," you know. And again, I mean I've got four tours. My brother's still active, getting ready to go back over there for his sixth tour. And my own mother calls me and says, "Hey, what's going on with this?" And I've got to sit down and explain it.

So my number-one concern really is the confidence, because the equipment's right. The equipment is good. And, you know, when these things happen, it does, it shakes it.

Q Yeah, it does.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: And again, I see it -- because I travel a lot. And we take our equipment out to installations to meet with folks. And family members will come up to the display, because we'll set up in a PX. And you know, it's twofold. It's educating the force on the equipment that's coming out, but also the family members. And we get a lot of the family members who, their mother, their father, their husband, their wife are deployed. And they want to see what the equipment is. And they hear these same things. Same thing over -- you pick the piece of equipment -- weapons, body armors. They want to know what ground truth is because they can't see it first-hand in the fight.

So the bottom line is, these plates are good. The plates are good. There are no reported incidents of the armor failing anywhere. And we've been at this fight for quite a while.

Q I know. My kid was over there in 2003 and '4, when, unfortunately, there wasn't enough to go around. So I'm coming at it from that end. But -- and I understand that you're setting up at things, and that's wonderful for those who live on post. But my main audience are the parents, and most of those parents aren't on post or near a post.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Then you're absolutely --

Q They're in, you know, Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, or Providence, Rhode Island, and their kid is stationed out of Fort Hood. So those are the ones who are e-mailing me and saying, you know, "What should we believe?" And it's very difficult for me to say believe everything you see and everything you hear, because I've been an Army wife for 30 years; I don't believe most. So I appreciate you taking the time to explain, you know, the testing. The testing is what people were worried about, that it was the company doing their own testing and going, "Yeah, okay, we're fine."

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: No, absolutely not. Absolutely not. There is government oversight.

Q Okay.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Yeah, absolutely. And like I said, none of these plates have failed. And believe it or not, the people who are in charge of body armor here at PEO Soldier have just as vested interest in this as they do, because the majority of our workforce have family members in this fight, and a lot of us have come from the fight and are going back to the fight.

Q Okay. Thank you.

MS. KYZER: Okay. And Christian, did you have a question?

Q Yeah, I did. Thanks again, Tom, for coming on the call.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: No problem, Christian. Thanks.

Q First -- I'm going to do this out of order, you know, Barbara-Starr-style, from the Pentagon press briefings. I have a follow-up and then a question. The follow-up is, how many of the 16,000-plus plates have been returned, and who had them?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: That's -- I can't answer that question, Christian. I don't -- it's not that I don't want to answer it. We're sorting through the

numbers right now. As you know, the ALARACT message just went out. We have received plates back already. So the best bet would be to stay -- regain contact with the STRATCOM team here at PEO, because I just don't know the answer to that. But I do know that we have started to received plates in already.

Q Okay. Now, my question is, we're here talking about all body armor, actually, and so I'm curious to know -- to see if you can sort of give some perspective on a story that we ran this week about -- I think it was Brigadier General Fuller at a congressional hearing on the 5th, yesterday, who said that -- and I guess the last time you and I talked, it was about XSAPI and FSAPI, which is -- seems to be sort of off the plate these days. What is the deal with XSAPI? I understand the Army was going to order 120,000 of these, but then they decided that they're going to warehouse them in Kuwait and make it up to the commander on whether or not -- unit commander on whether or not he needs those.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: No, I'll tell you --

Q Is it -- (wasn't it ?) wrong to spend the time and money to develop this if no one's going to use it? I mean, is the threat just not there?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Well, I would tell you -- one is -- I'd be honest with you. That's a question we're going to have to run back through up to General Fuller, because that is an ongoing discussion right now with the DA?? staff. Everything from exactly where the plates are at in the R&D world and where they're at in relation to first article testing, as I explained earlier. So that process is still ongoing. So it is not that those plates are sitting in a warehouse somewhere. When you talk about the threat that the XSAPI is designed to -- we haven't seen where the plates that we're using right now are being defeated by anything. But we do know that there are emerging technologies that in the future could. And that's where XSAPI is going. So to get into the X and the FSAPI -- or F armor -- I really can't give you the good answers on that.

Q Okay. But as a liaison with the boots-on-the-ground Joes, do you have a sense from them that there's a need for the XSAPI, for something more burly than the ESAPI?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: No. No.

Q Yeah.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: And my trigger for that would be somebody coming up and saying, hey, I just lost a soldier to this and you have a capability that can stop it.

Q Okay.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: And that's not -- that's not what's coming from the --

Q But you didn't lose a soldier to the threat that the ESAPI stops, did you?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Not that I'm aware of.

Q Okay. But you spent all this time and money developing it and, you know, adding an extra pound, basically, to the -- to the --

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Because we know there are emerging threats that have the possibility to defeat what we have now.

Q Right.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: And if a threat arrives while we have the capability to stop it, then we're going to get it on the soldiers.

Q Check. Okay.

MS. KYZER: Okay. We'll go back down the line. Andrew, did you have a question?

Q No, I'm good. Thanks. I'll listen to everybody else's -- steal it from everybody else.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Thank you, Andrew.

MS. KYZER: And Rob, did you have a question? Q Just one, real quick. Sergeant Major, it falls in line with when they returned and who they went to, but can you tell me when they were put in-country?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: When what was put in-country? The --

Q The 16,000 sets.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: No, I can't. And this is -- that's a good question, actually; brings up a good point. I can't tell you -- and it goes back to Christian's also -- exactly what unit has them right now. So that's one of the things that we're going back in and looking at is trying to work better -- put a better system and better processes in place to ensure that when we go to a -- say a lot number needs to come back for return, that we can go straight down to the platoon and identify who that was fielded to.

But no, I cannot tell you where they were at or when these ones were put in theater or even in they are in theater.

Q Right. Thank you.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Thanks, Rob.

MS. KYZER: And Chuck, did you have another question?

Q I'm good, I think.

MS. KYZER: And Karen, another question?

Q No, I'm fine. Thank you very much.

MS. KYZER: Okay, Christian?

Q What do you think?

MS. KYZER: (Laughs.) I think you could fill the remaining -- (off mike).

Q Christian can hold me up for the rest of the night.

Q No, no, no. I won't do that. You know, Lindy already sort of chided me earlier, so -- but I do have one question, because I was combing through the IG report and I saw a reference here to -- and I would assume that you'd know about this and could explain it. After they talked about recommending to the Army that they would pull back the plates in the designs in question, that they questioned the ballistic capabilities of, there was a line in there that said specifically the Army required a return of 8,018 ballistic inserts in December 2008. And then there's nothing else regarding that.

Can you talk to us about what that return was all about?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Yes. And here was -- first of all, in the report I don't think anywhere in there it says that it failed any ballistic testing. I think it says that there were (concerns ?) over the testing and scoring, but not -- nothing failed ballistic testing. No bullets penetrated the plates and then were accepted as a passed test.

Q Actually, to correct you, it does say that, but it says that testers replaced certain-sized plates for -- you know the results of sized plates.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Right. Okay. You're correct, Christian, but I don't want to get over-technical.

Q Right. I understand. I understand.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: What happened was, there was a -- the plates are designed to stop a specific threat, and that threat is developed on a specific weight-size of the bullet traveling at a specific velocity -- which, by the way, all of that exceeds the threat that's in theater. So that when you shot a plate at over-velocity, so you shot it with much more than what you are supposed to shoot it with and the plate still stopped it, and then you shot the second round in it and that second round penetrated the plate, it ballistically failed, we did not count that, and we would go in and shoot another plate. If that second round was stopped, then we counted that. Q Right.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: So that's where you're talking the inconsistency, where another plate was pulled in and shot because one failed. It failed because it was shot with more -- with an over-velocity shot. If it would have penetrated on a standard-velocity shot, it would have been counted as a failed plate.

Q Right. But what about the 8,000 --

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: So back to the 8,000. That's correct. We pulled out 8,018 plates a little while back.

And again, that was just part of a continued surveillance testing. None of those -- and that's, as I was saying, we bring plates in from the field to look at what's going on with them out there. And we shoot those plates, too.

Those plates, when the Army looked at the lot acceptance test back then for the big string of plates that were shot, they saw that there were a couple failed lot tests out there. Those plates were never accepted. They were scrapped.

In between them there were a couple lots that passed, but we said, hey, you know what? Let's pull those plates anyways. You know, there was something that could have been going on in that process. They all passed, but let's pull those anyways and shoot those plates just to see how they look. So it was just part of the surveillance program. Those lots passed. Everything was good with them. Some lots in front of and behind them had failed and were not accepted, but we opted to pull those 8,000 plates just to see -- just as, again, part of our surveillance program.

Q And what did you find?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: We're still shooting those plates.

Q Okay.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: So -- but we're finding nothing.

Q Which manufacturer was it?

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: That I do not know.

Q Okay.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: I think -- well, I think it was ArmorWorks, but you'll have to get back to STRATCOM to confirm that.

Q Check. Thanks a lot.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Okay, Christian.

MS. KYZER: Are there any other final questions out there? (No response.) Okay, so we'll go ahead and turn it back over to Sergeant Major for any closing comments or anything we didn't touch on that he'd like to address. SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Okay, yeah. And I'll be short, because I know everybody has to get out there. And they want to get their -- these blogs up and running as everybody's hitting the weekend.

But again, I really just want to close with telling you all thank you, because it's critical that the force gets informed. To me, the media is very important, because there's got to be checks and balances across the board, you know. So things need to be questioned; things need to be explained. And I appreciate you all taking the time to talk with me and the organizations and continue to follow up to do that.

I just want to really emphasize that there is some confusion going on in -- out in the communities, out with the -- out with the family members, but I cannot overemphasize that the body armor that the soldiers are wearing in combat right now have not failed them. They are not bad -- it is not bad body armor. What they are wearing passed lot acceptance tests, passed first article tests, is completely safe, has not let them down.

The soldiers need to maintain the confidence level that they've got -- their confidence in their equipment, their confidence in their training and their confidence in their leader. And all of us -- all of us need to be incredibly proud of what they're doing out there, because I tell you, I see a lot of these young soldiers making decisions that I'm not sure if I could have made those same decisions when I was 20, 21 years old.

So if something's not right we need to get out there and get it fixed, but we've got to maintain the confidence with the soldiers that are in the fight, that they need it.

And this is one of those cases where what they are wearing is a hundred percent good.

And that's really all I have. Again, I'd say thanks.

MS. KYZER: Thank you so much, Sergeant Major. We really appreciate your taking the time to talk about such an important issue. Thanks to the bloggers who joined us on this Friday afternoon.

This concludes the roundtable. If you have any follow-up questions or don't know who to contact with PEO Soldier, just hit me up on my e-mail and I'll connect you to the right folks.

SGT. MAJ. COLEMAN: Thank you, Lindy. Appreciate it.

Q Thanks -- (inaudible).

Q Okay. Thanks a lot. Thanks -- (inaudible).

Q Bye-bye.

Q And Lindy, will you be getting out a transcript -- (inaudible) -- one as well?

MS. KYZER: Pardon?

Q Will there be a transcript for this one as well?

MS. KYZER: Yes, there will be a transcript. It will be done sometime likely this evening. So as soon as I get it in, I'll shoot it to you.

Q I appreciate it. Thank you.

MS. KYZER: Yup.

END.